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WASHINGTON—The Kazakh parliament has moved decisively toward passage of a draft law governing religious communities that would restrict rather than strengthen protections of freedom of religion or belief. The law follows the example of other former Soviet republics that have increased legal and other restrictions on freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief.

“The lower parliamentary chamber’s passage of the religion law does not bode well for a country that is slated in 2010 to become chair of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe,” said Commission Chair Felice D. Gaer.

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom urges the U.S. government to speak out against such restrictive laws on religion including at the current Human Dimension meeting in Warsaw of the OSCE, a 56-state, trans-Atlantic security organization safeguarding human rights. Failing any announcement of modification of this law by the Kazakh government, the Commission asks the U.S. government to work promptly and effectively through diplomatic channels to urge the Kazakh government to revise or revoke the legislation.

“With this law, Kazakhstan has demonstrated a disturbingly lax commitment to uphold international human rights standards,” Gaer said. “Despite Kazakh officials’ assurances at the OSCE meeting in Warsaw, this law neither simplifies the legal requirements for religious communities nor augments their freedom.”

The law, which still must be acted on by the upper chamber of parliament before going to the Kazakh president for signature, will introduce more restrictive registration requirements for all religious groups, reduce the number of religious communities permitted to operate in Kazakhstan, and increase the penalties for members of unregistered communities. It will increase the minimum number of members of religious organizations necessary to register from 10 to 50. According to the law, smaller communities could not teach or profess their religion, own property, or rent public space for religious activities. All contributions from foreigners and anonymous donors would be prohibited.

The Commission also is concerned about regression in freedom of religion or belief in other countries of Central Asia. The Uzbek government continues to arrest Muslims and harass members of other religious communities that do not conform to government-prescribed practices or that the government claims are associated with extremist political programs. Both Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan—countries that the Commission has recommended be designated by the U.S. State Department as “countries of particular concern,” or CPCs, for their egregious and systematic violations of religious freedom—have laws on religion that severely limit the ability of religious communities to function and facilitate the governments’ exercise of a high degree of control over religious communities and the approved manner in which Islam and other religions are practiced.

The governments of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan currently are developing their own laws regulating religious communities, both of which require communities to register with the government in order to operate legally; both laws have been criticized heavily by the religious communities they seek to regulate, as well as by OSCE experts. In the Tajik capital, Dushanbe, the climate for religious freedom has deteriorated over the past year with the demolition of several mosques, a Protestant church and the country’s sole synagogue.

“The U.S. government should discuss with the Central Asian governments better ways to establish a legal framework for religious communities that takes into account the need to respect international standards and provide wide legal latitude for them to operate,” Gaer said.